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At Seattle Art Fair, the Interaction Between Technology and Modern Life

by Kirk Johnson
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SEATTLE – Physicists, picking up where Einstein left off, say the titanic impact of two black holes colliding can make a sound detectable through gravitational waves that wash across space and time. Dawn Kasper, in trying to create her version of that sound as a project for the Seattle Art Fair, said she thought it might be a little like the fading echoes of a great Seattle rock show, in the resonant hum of a crashing cymbal.

“Good night, Seattle!” she shouted on a recent morning as she worked.

Ms. Kasper, a 39-year-old New York-based performance artist, hired an intern to hunt down 80 used drum-kit cymbals that had been through lives of pounding percussive passion in the Pacific Northwest. She wanted character, not shiny out of the box. Some of the cymbals she got were grimy with age and water spots that hinted of concerts in the rain. Others were chipped, dinged and dented.

Then Ms. Kasper wired up the cymbals with motion sensors and fingernail-sized electronic motors that would set each cymbal to vibrating as visitors to the exhibit, called “Star Formation,” walked by. Each person’s motion created a web of shimmering metallic harmony from brass disks of different sizes, arrangements and flaws.

“You walk through space and you have cause and effect,” she said.

The Seattle Art Fair, started last year by Paul G. Allen, the co-founder of Microsoft, has a proud inner geek.

Two monolithic blocks of graphite, carved by Adam McEwen into replicas of an IBM supercomputer, greeted visitors as they walked in. Another exhibit, by TeamLab, encouraged children to draw their wildest fantasy sea creatures, which then came to digital life swimming around on a giant screen. Visitors could attend a tour of the four-day fair in Martian English, a new dialect invented by a Los Angeles-based artist, Glenn Kaino, for his project, called “Aspiration.”



“Star Formation,” by Dawn Kasper, showcases used drum-kit cymbals and motion sensors to create vibrations as visitors walk by. Credit Evan McGlenn for The New York Times

But like Mr. Allen himself, who has fingerprints on much of the city's explosion of growth, geekiness only touches the surface.

Through a real estate development arm of his company, Vulcan Inc., he is building the vast urban campus of Amazon. His Allen Institute is bringing Ph.D. researchers in brain and cell science to Seattle from around the world. And his sports franchise, the Seattle Seahawks of the N.F.L., is a local obsession.

Now his passion for art, as a collector and benefactor, is resonating too. The fair, which featured 84 galleries from locations as varied as New York, Los Angeles, Seoul and Miami – up from 60 in its first year – drew more than 15,000 visitors last year, and had about 18,000 by the fair's close on Sunday.

What the fair says about Seattle, and whether its art community was sufficiently represented, with 18 Pacific Northwest galleries on the roster – and only 10 from Seattle – remains a continuing debate.

A satellite festival, called Out of Sight, organized last year by Seattle artists and galleries who felt squeezed out of Mr. Allen's big tent, was back again this year, filling 21,000 square feet in a historic train station within walking distance of the main fair. What started partly out of frustration, artists and gallery owners said, has now become an established platform for local work.

"If there's going to be all this energy, and all these collectors coming in from out of town, and critics and press talking about it, we can either, as an art community, sit on the sideline and watch the spectacle, or we can participate and ride that wave. I'm not one to sit out a big opportunity," said Greg Lundgren, Out of Sight's founder.

Other private galleries in the city, like Roq La Rue, were timing the opening of shows this year to coincide with the fair.

"People are really trying to rise to the occasion," said Kirsten Anderson, Roq La Rue's owner and founder. "I haven't heard as much complaining this year," she added.

Carl and Jeannette Pergam, both retired physicians who were visiting the fair from a Seattle suburb, said they were struck by the high prices, which they said spoke to them partly about the art's quality, but also about the wave of wealth in Seattle from the explosion of growth at technology companies like Amazon and Microsoft.

"When you see a Frankenthaler, you say, 'that's a Frankenthaler,' and you know you can't afford it – Paul Allen can afford it," said Mr. Pergam, 74, referring to Helen Frankenthaler, the painter. They were on their way to a local gallery that had, they hoped, more work in their price range. Ameringer McEnergy Yohe, a New York gallery, offered a 1987 acrylic by Frankenthaler, titled "Groundswell," for \$1.25 million at the Seattle Art Fair.

Nicole Vartanian, who took a day off work to visit Out of Sight before heading to the Seattle Art Fair, said she was struck by the political power of many of the pieces at Out of Sight, like Paul Rucker's life-size recreation of a Ku Klux Klan rally with mannequins in brightly colored robes and hoods, called "Birth of a Nation."

"The ones I would put up on my wall are sparse," said Ms. Vartanian, 47, a cancer researcher who lives in Seattle. "But there's a lot of important work here."

Mr. Allen said in an interview that he pushed no particular vision of what the fair should be about, but that he likes the interplay of intellect and emotion.

"There's always this interesting tension between fairly intellectual pursuits like science, and more visceral pursuits like art, and how they respond and bond to each other," he said. He also deeply appreciates, he added, the simple joy of the unexpected.

"I remember the first time I saw a Lichtenstein, at the Tate in London – just that you could be so surprised," he said. The canvas that so stunned him was Roy Lichtenstein's 1963 pop art painting, "Whaam!," which captures a fighter pilot during midair combat.

Laura Fried, the Seattle Art Fair's artistic director, said that she gravitated to what the artists were trying to say about the connection between technology and modern life.

"The conceptual underpinnings are more what I find interesting," she said.

Wynne Greenwood's outdoor public composition, called "In Loving Memory," for example, seems barely touched by tech at all, at least on the surface. In a square near the fair where people gather for lunch, Ms. Greenwood, 39, installed big white foam cushions with clip art images, found on Google by searching for emotions and ideas inspired by the cities in Washington State where she has lived. Whether visitors understand the connections and images, she said, is less important than how they react to the cushions themselves, and use them.

"The way that we are arranging our world is changing, with digital space merging with physical space," she said. "I really love thinking about softness in public."

Ms. Kasper said she thought about the human stories behind the objects in assembling her cymbals project. Her fantasy was that a musician would walk through "Star Formation," recognize some well-worn cymbal that he or she once owned, pull her aside and tell her a great back story about the night it got cracked.